

A MODEST PROPOSAL FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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The Problems.

The new millennium confronts prosperous nations with two apparently intractable problems. One is persistently high unemployment, with the number of long term unemployed also at high levels. This threatens to create an underclass locked into welfare dependency, educational underachievement, despair and alienation. The second problem is that many of those who work suffer marginal and insecure employment. Increasing numbers of workers in Western nations are engaged in low-paid casual or part-time or temporary contract work, or are beset by economic insecurity. For many, this has meant that planning for the future is out of the question. Relentless restructurings and ruthless downsizings in both private and public sectors are driving more and more people into unemployment or marginal employment.¹ While Western economies are growing quite strongly as the century draws to a close, those workers who are not yet unemployed are either actually insecure and relatively impoverished, or justifiably anxious.

This is part of wider trend to increased economic inequality. The wealthy of advanced capitalist societies are getting seriously richer while the real incomes of the majority of working people are stagnant or falling. In affluent but widely unequal societies, substantial numbers find themselves without sufficient resources for a decent life within the prevailing social conditions. The condition of those on the bottom of the pile – the unemployed underclass – is tantamount to social exclusion.

At the other end of the social spectrum, the top ten per cent of our societies has opted out of threadbare public structures into a world of largely private provision - private

* The first named author should be credited with the initiative for the key ideas in this paper.

¹ British economic commentator Will Hutton has described Britain as a 30/30/40 society. Only 40% of adults have permanent full-time employment; 30% work on a casual or part-time basis without any economic security; and 30% are economically inactive and dependent. The same trends are evident in the other advanced economies. (See Hutton, W. *The State we're in*. London, 1995)

schools, private health care, private security, and so on. They are retreating from responsibility for the poor and disadvantaged, calling ever more stridently for lower taxes and less social welfare provision. The super-rich, like the corporations they partly manage and own, tend to lead multinational lives, moving themselves and their money from nation to nation as they wish, shedding assets and workers in one country and investing in another whenever this seems advantageous. Meanwhile the majority of taxpayers in advanced capitalist nations have been seduced by free-market ideology into accepting policies of privatising public resources and cutting back public expenditure, especially on social welfare. These policies have only further pushed the underclass toward social exclusion.

Are things about to get better, at least in some countries, following the election of labour and social democratic governments in Britain, France and Germany? Will the emergence of ‘compassionate conservatism’ in Britain, Australia and elsewhere also make a difference? With both the social democratic ‘third way’ and ‘compassionate’ conservatism, it seems that the same policies of marketisation, free trade, privatisation and welfare cutbacks will be pursued. What both offer is the prospect of some kind of social inclusion to counter the effects of these policies. But, in practice, will they offer anything more than smoke and mirrors? We have a proposal that might make a modest but real contribution to a solution for the new millennium to problems of unemployment, insecurity and social exclusion.

The Proposal.

Our proposal is that we *reintroduce chattel slavery* – but this time on an optional basis – for all those facing the prospect of social exclusion. We should change the law to allow individuals the choice of contracting into a term of slavery – even lifelong slavery – as chattels of wealthy owners capable of providing them with secure sustenance in return for unpaid labour at the behest of their masters.

It is not envisaged that voluntary slavery would replace the familiar employment of wage labour by capitalists; it would, rather, be an addition to it, an option for those who fear for good reason that they will not be able to find secure paid employment. This new institution of slavery would be regulated so as to impose obligations of adequate slave maintenance on the owners. Slaves would have some basic rights - rights to food, lodging and medical care for themselves and any dependents. Of course, slave-owners would receive child support payments that enslaved parents would have received, and could receive a subsidy for including their slaves in a comprehensive private health insurance policy. Slave-owners who were still unable to

meet their obligations would be able to sell their slaves in regulated slave markets to other reputable owners. Slave markets would be the mechanism guaranteeing slaves lifelong security, even if their owners become insolvent. Of course, after the initial free choice the new slavery would still be similar in crucial respects to older forms of the institution. Runaway slaves would be lawbreakers who could be hunted down and returned to their owners. Recalcitrant slaves could be summarily punished by their owners.

The Benefits.

The primary benefit of the reintroduction of slavery would be to solve, very largely, the problems of long-term unemployment and socially-excluded underclasses. At a stroke the cost of absorbing the unemployed into useful work would be cut to the bare minimum. At the moment one of the main barriers to full-employment is the high cost to employers of wage labour - costs that include paid holidays, sick leave, superannuation contributions, the expense of meeting occupational health and safety standards, and much more besides. Employers have moaned for years that they would employ more people if only the cost of doing so were not so high. Slaves would obviously be much cheaper than waged workers. They would be less expensive to maintain than dependent teenagers (for they would not need to be expensively educated) or a dependent spouse. So the super-rich could afford quite a few slaves, as servants and personal assistants, and as extra labour for use in their various business interests. Even the moderately well-off should be able to afford one or two.

Slavery would not always be cheaper than employment of independent contractors, but it would provide another alternative to waged employment, alongside and supplementing exploitation of contract labour. One currently fashionable way of avoiding the high cost of employment in the fashion trade, for example, is to contract with a seamstress to sew shirts at home, paying a pittance for each shirt sewn. Limitations on working hours, sick pay, occupational health and safety standards and all the other costs of usual employment can be side-stepped, with contractors forced to work eighteen or more hours a day. Slavery would not replace this practice, but complement it where it would be useful to have a long-term, reliable, supply of labour for any purpose that a master might desire. Manifestly, then, a new institution of voluntary slavery would be capable of soaking up the permanently unemployed and underemployed into useful service to the rich and well-off.

Many accept that the pressures of globalisation and technological change mean that governments cannot provide employment where the private sector has failed to. But

though there may not be enough real jobs to go round, there is nevertheless a virtually unlimited amount of work that those of us who are relatively well-off would like to have done if only it could be done for virtually nothing. Cleaning. Cooking. Gardening. Serving. Fetching. Carrying. Slaves would be ideally suited to these forms of servile labour. Slavery would open up a whole new dimension of useful service work for those now suffering the enforced idleness of unemployment. One of the curses of unemployment is the sense of uselessness, of not being socially needed, that attends it. Voluntary slaves, on the other hand, would have a far greater sense of self-worth than welfare dependents, since they would be valued pieces of personal property performing useful and helpful tasks. In slave states before the US Civil War, masters loading ships employed Irish free labourers in the holds, where they were in danger of injury, and used slaves on the wharves, because slave owners would not risk injury to their valuable slaves. Slaves have thus been treated as more valuable than free-labourers in the past, and will be more valued again.

Voluntary slavery would not in many instances be radically dissimilar to the sort of life endured by housewives during the first half of the twentieth century, before the upsurge of feminism. Some housewives then complained that they too would have liked 'wives' of their own, if only it were possible. Voluntary slavery could revive the housewife in a more politically correct, non-sexist form. Since men and women alike could own slaves, rich women too could have male 'wives' (that is, domestic and sexual slaves). What was once only a feminist fantasy could become a reality. Men who preferred sexual slaves to partners with minds and resources of their own could purchase a slave rather than treat their spouses as such. Men and women would be equal under the slave system: they would be equally able to own slaves; and equally entitled to opt for slavery.

Voluntary slavery would also diminish demands on our public welfare systems, which are being wound back under pressures to cut expenditures and lower taxes. Just as many countries seek to partially privatise support for the elderly through superannuation schemes, so support for the unemployed and indigent could be partly privatised through slavery. Slaves would be securely maintained by the rich in return for unpaid service. By lessening the welfare drain on the public purse, slavery would help our economies become leaner and meaner. This would generate a virtuous circle, whereby slavery produces more rich people, who could in turn support more slaves.

As indicated earlier, the super-rich in our societies are withdrawing from public obligation. The reintroduction of slavery, however, could re-ignite a sense of *noblesse oblige* among the rich, inspiring personal support for the poor by way of slave-

ownership. Here the principle of mutual obligation would be satisfied and be seen to be satisfied: slaves would labour at the whim of their masters (or mistresses); and masters (or mistresses) would provide for their slaves. Indeed the new slave system could be seen as a sort of privatised extension of the work-for-the-dole schemes currently fashionable in Australia and parts of America.

Another benefit of slavery would be increased security for wealth. Members of under-classes quite often and naturally resort to crime, especially crimes against property. Crime and vandalism worsen as our societies grow more unequal, as the poor are constantly provoked by the contrasting conspicuous consumption of the rich. Lurking behind rising crime rates is the even worse threat of social revolution. A system of voluntary slavery, however, would help safeguard wealth and property from both crime and revolution. It would turn a goodly proportion of the underclass itself into property, thereby placing many of the poor under the direct control of wealthy slave-owners, who would be armed with powers of summary punishment. It would provide a private alternative to developing a massive state prison system like that in the US, which functions as a system of state slavery. Not that powers of summary punishment would be needed as much as police and prisons are now, for the new slaves, enjoying material security for the first time in their lives, would be less liable as well as less able to commit crimes. We should also remember that crime threatens the less well-off even more than the very wealthy, as they are less able to protect their possessions. Voluntary slavery would make everyone more secure, including both slaves and the free poor.

The unemployed poor now face social exclusion. Many could rejoin the social mainstream by opting for slavery. Slaves to the very rich might well enjoy a sumptuous lifestyle beyond the imagination of those now trapped at the bottom of our liberal capitalist societies. Unfortunately the institution of slavery at this point in history has a bad image, largely because at the time of abolition the dominant form was the brutal plantation slavery of the Americas and the Caribbean. In ancient Greece and Rome, however, slavery was not always oppressive and brutalising. Slaves to rich and powerful men often themselves had a great deal of derivative wealth and power; some even had slaves of their own. Under slavery in the new millennium, many slaves would also share in the lifestyles and amenities of the rich and famous. They would eat exotic fare, sail about on luxury yachts, fly around in private jets, and share expensive vacations and recreations. Some would be treated as valued members of wealthy extended families. Others might come to exercise considerable degrees of delegated power. For the most part the new slaves would participate more fully, if indirectly, in our consumer society than would the free poor.

The younger unemployed might opt for a period of slavery only, during which their masters could exploit their youth. Those who are thrown on the unemployed scrap heap in their late middle age could opt for life-long slavery and the security that would bring. The old might not be as hardy or desirable as the young, but they would bring the benefits of their experience, and additional benefits to both the slave-owner and society that would accrue from their status as property. Since slave-owners would own the bodies of their life-long slaves at and beyond the point of death they would be able to sell on the body parts for use in transplant surgery and medical experimentation. A shortage of transplant organs would no longer be a problem. Owners would even be able to lease the bodies of slaves for medical experimentation while they were still alive (subject to broad safety conditions established by industry regulators). Advances in medical knowledge would consequently accelerate. Slave-owners could also own the DNA of their slaves, so that they could patent and make available on the market any advantageous genetic sequences they were discovered to possess (such as those that provide protection from serious diseases).

In summary, the reintroduction of slavery would have far-reaching benefits. It would benefit everyone - slaves, slave-owners, and other free citizens. It would not be a return to barbarism, as many might unreflectively think, but rather a higher stage in the development of liberal values and liberal societies. Voluntary slavery would actually enhance individual liberty by widening the range of freedom of choice to include the options of both slavery and slave-ownership.

Refutation of Objections.

1. Slavery is immoral because it denies freedom to the slaves.

Sure, earlier forms of slavery were wrong for precisely this reason. Slavery was forced labour. Slaves were initially captured and coerced into slavery, and were retained in servitude by force and violence. Under the present proposal, however, the initial choice to become a slave is a free choice by an autonomous agent in a liberal society. A system of voluntary slavery would actually provide people with a new opportunity and hence a new freedom that they presently do not have. So, in relation to life choices, voluntary slavery does not deny autonomy to would-be slaves but rather respects and enlarges their freedom.

Of course, following the initial choice, slaves would be entirely unfree. While they would have some rights to adequate maintenance they would have no rights at all to self-determination. Slave contracts would be enforceable. Since slaves would be

property they would be just as fully under the *de jure* control of their owners as, say, a working animal on a farm currently is. This is the crucial consideration that has swayed most of those who have actually thought about the possibility of voluntary slavery to rule it out of contention. How can a choice of total future unfreedom possibly be a legitimate freedom? How could it be justifiable for a society committed to the value of individual liberty to condone, enable and enforce such contracts?

That champion of individual liberty, John Stuart Mill, was certainly persuaded that voluntary slavery agreements shouldn't be allowed because the slaves would be abdicating their future freedom completely. In Mill's own words:

The reason for not interfering, unless for the sake of others, with a person's voluntary acts is consideration for his liberty. ... But by selling himself for a slave he abdicates his liberty; he forgoes any future use of it beyond that single act. ... The principle of freedom cannot require that he should be free not to be free²

This argument runs counter to Mill's own insistence that, over matters that directly affect only his or her own self, an individual's sovereignty is absolute. The burden of his anti-slavery argument is that people shouldn't be allowed to do anything counterproductive to a maximisation of their future freedom. Following this principle, however, leads straight to conclusions that Mill himself would never have endorsed. For one thing, since death precludes any future exercise of freedom, voluntary euthanasia and suicide would have to be regarded as impermissible. Smoking, drinking, eating junk foods and indulging in risky sports all threaten to undercut future freedom, so that under a regime of freedom maximisation all these choices would have to be disallowed. The impetus of Mill's argument doesn't stop at the single case of slavery agreements; it carries us on towards compulsory diets, health police and other authoritarian paternalistic excesses that are a long way from respect for personal freedom and autonomy.

Thoroughgoing liberalism, on the other hand, permits people to make self-damaging decisions so long as others are not directly and significantly harmed (as Mill himself agreed, about cases other than voluntary slavery). So even if we agree, for the sake of argument, that freely entering into slavery would necessarily damage the slave's interests overall, we still would not thereby be compelled to accept, from a strong liberal perspective, that such acts should be impermissible. But in any case (as we've seen and will expand on later) there are good reasons to suppose that voluntary

² Mill, J.S. *On Liberty*.

enslavement may be for some people the best choice in terms of their overall interests, *given their available alternatives*.

The crucial point, however, is this: if individual freedom is a basic right, and if personal autonomy is an intrinsic good for human beings, then people must be allowed the scope to make life-changing, risk-taking, freedom-restricting, life-damaging and even life-ruining decisions. This is part of what it means to be a free and autonomous agent. To interfere in an individual's choice to become a slave, therefore, would be to treat him in a manner inconsistent with respect for him as an autonomous agent. So the institution of voluntary slavery would not deny overall freedom to the slaves; on the contrary, it would respect their personal autonomy as expressed in their initial choices.

2. Since, under this proposal, slaves would mainly be recruited from the underclass, slavery contracts would not be agreements between free and equal partners. Many poor people would be more-or-less forced by their impoverished circumstances into slavery. Most decisions to enter slavery would fall so far short of ideal or full voluntariness as to be, essentially, nonvoluntary. They would be compelled by imposed social conditions, hence unfree and unfair.

True, a perfectly voluntary agreement is one between parties who are equally in possession of the relevant facts, who have equally unclouded judgement, and who are equal in freedom, power and status. Slavery agreements fall short of this ideal. They would not be agreements between parties initially equal in resources and power. The slave option would appeal mostly to the poor and marginalised members of our societies, and slave-ownership would only be possible for the economically comfortable and secure, so that potential slaves and slave-owners would usually be occupants of highly unequal socio-economic positions. An agreement to slavery would be an agreement by the poor to accept a 'lesser evil' from the rich. However it doesn't follow from the fact that slavery agreements would be less than ideally voluntary that they cannot be *sufficiently* voluntary to warrant respect as morally and legally binding commitments. It cannot be the case that any decision falling short of perfect voluntariness must be made under duress - any more than anything falling short of the perfectly circular must be non-circular. Political arrangements that are not perfectly democratic may nevertheless warrant acceptance as democratically legitimate. So, too, individual choices that are some degrees short of perfect voluntariness may still be voluntary enough to be accepted as autonomous commitments.

In the real social world, hardly any of the agreements and bargains we accept as voluntary are made between parties in perfectly equal socio-economic positions. This is especially true, despite the efforts of unions, of agreements between wage-workers and large corporate employers. A decision to enter slavery need be no different in kind, at least on the score of unequal powers, from a decision to accept low-paid low-grade employment (or for that matter, to join the army). These latter choices may well be to a degree forced on our indigent agent by his social and economic circumstances, yet according to the prevailing liberal ethos they would still be regarded as free choices that carry all the moral implications of voluntariness. So why shouldn't the choice of slavery equally be regarded as voluntary?

Again in the real world quite a few women in marginal circumstances resort to prostitution as a way of obtaining some material security. Most of us wouldn't pretend that the initial situation of these women is a good or reasonable one, or that the prostitution option is so intrinsically attractive that they would have chosen it in better circumstances. Even so, those liberals who favour the legalisation of prostitution under present conditions must also believe that most of the choices women make to pursue this career option are sufficiently voluntary to be socially legitimated and respected. They must regard prostitution as an option that should be freely available to those women (and men too) who are trying, according to their own lights, to do the best they can in a bad situation. Why shouldn't the slavery option be similarly regarded?

Of course social marginalisation and exclusion are social evils. Ideally nobody should suffer them. We must remember, though, that it is we ourselves, the democratic majority in the liberal capitalist nations, who have determined that our societies should primarily pursue the values of economic liberalism and the free market. We have decided to trade away egalitarian justice for the opportunity, however tenuous, of becoming rich. The emphasis we have given to economic liberties and market competition means that quite large numbers of the poor and marginalised will keep haunting us for the foreseeable future. Shouldn't we, then, offer them the greatest possible range of opportunities to make, according to their own choices, informed by their own characters and viewpoints, the best they can of their difficult circumstances? Slavery may not be an ideal option for anyone, but it may still be a reasonable option for those locked into miserable and insecure situations. So voluntary slavery could be one element in a range of free opportunities that suit the structure and functioning of our market societies.

3. Voluntary slavery wouldn't work, no-one would opt for it, because no-one in their right mind would surrender entirely something as basic and important as individual freedom. It couldn't possibly be a rational choice for anyone. And of course anyone not in full possession of their faculties cannot be held to have autonomously chosen slavery.

Humanity, we know, encompasses a huge variety of actual human beings, each with her or his own unique set of characteristics, capacities and inclinations. Each person is also both influenced and constrained by a particular life history and a specific set of social circumstances. Within this enormous variety we can find not only people who thrive on the continual free exercise of their powers but also people who are uncomfortable with, even terrified by, the demands and exigencies of a fully self-determining life.

Aristotle once said that some people are natural slaves. He was, evidence suggests, quite right. The existence today of submissive housewives, uxorious husbands, volunteer military personnel, religious cult members, and people all too willing to be pushed around by those with wealth and power, testifies to his wisdom. So the right sort of people to be slaves do exist amongst us. And the right sorts of circumstances for slavery – impoverishment and marginalisation – are enveloping more and more people. So, yes, it can reasonably be predicted that if slavery were to be made available as an option in our advanced but polarised capitalist societies, it would be eagerly taken up by quite large numbers of people, none of whom need be acting irrationally.

In fact, conditions are becoming more and more favourable for voluntary slavery. Management and free-market gurus lecture workers on the need to adapt to constant change, to be ready to change their job many times during the course of their working lives, to seek out creative business opportunities for themselves, and to re-train and re-educate themselves continuously. However quite large numbers of people are quite unsuited to this sort of quasi-entrepreneurial lifestyle. They cannot cope with constant unsettling change, and are frightened by the expanded freedom to take responsibility for themselves. In the past many of these gentler souls were sheltered in relatively unproductive but secure employment with governments and in protected industries. However, now that these niches are rapidly disappearing, the people who once occupied them would mostly be destined for failure and destitution unless, of course, the option of slavery is made available. For them the choice of slavery would make a great deal of sense.

Karl Marx once said that the future contains only two possibilities - socialism or barbarism. If he was right, then we have chosen free-market barbarism as the fundamental structure of our societies. Within this structure we can only realistically hope as a society to do the best for people that suffer dehumanised conditions. A policy of re-instituting slavery would be one way of making the best we can out of bad (for some) circumstances.

4. Slave-owners would have unlimited power over their slaves. Such enormous power would inevitably lead to abuse. Slaves would suffer cruelty and maltreatment, and have no recourse or protection against abuse.

Slavery has sometimes been defined, in moral terms, as a relation in which slaves have no rights at all while their owners enjoy the right to do whatever they like to their slaves. Within that structure slaves would be mere instruments, having no more moral or legal status than your television set or electric frying pan. Under the present proposal, however, this would not be the case. Slaves would have rights against their owners, rights to adequate and secure maintenance, which would be legally enforceable. Within this structure, slaves should be just as well protected from abuse by their owners as, say, very young children are currently protected by the state from abuse by their parents. The new slaves, it is envisaged, would have a legal status somewhere between that of domestic animals and very young children, and very akin to that of prisoners of the state.

However, if we in the general community came to regard sole reliance on the state for the protection of slaves' rights as somewhat inadequate, we could set up non-government humanitarian organisations to monitor and reinforce the performance of this task. In Australia, for instance, in addition to such worthy organisations as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, we could found the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Slaves. What more could slaves ask for (if they are allowed to ask for anything)?

5. Slavery would morally corrupt the slave-owners. They would not be able to confine the attitudes appropriate to owned objects just to their slaves. They would develop a tendency to treat other free citizens as objects too, rather than as autonomous subjects worthy of equal respect.

Under the present proposal, slavery would involve only a fairly small sector in the mainly capitalist economies of generally liberal democratic societies. Most people would not be either slaves or slave-owners. The numbers of slaves, though substantial, would probably not exceed those of present-day welfare recipients. So the

social relationships of the slave-owners would be mostly with other free citizens. Their basic social experience would be of a market economy, democratic political institutions and a liberal legal framework. So there is no reason to expect them to be morally any worse than members of the middle and upper classes are today. Indeed we could reasonably expect the new Master/Slave relationships to be more humanised than brutalised, because of the overwhelmingly liberal humanist socialisation of the new slave-owners. Far from slavery corrupting the slave-owners, the overarching liberal setting for the new form of slavery would influence the owners to be, if anything, excessively considerate to their slaves.

So there it is, then, the proposal of voluntary enslavement as a way of uplifting the underclass and providing opportunities for those on the border of social exclusion. History, we know, never repeats itself. We can't re-create the past, nor should we try to, but we would be unwise not to try to adapt the good features of old institutions to new situations and problems while at the same time transforming their bad features. This is precisely what the proposal of *voluntary* slavery does.

Those who labour in policy think-tanks have often been told to 'think the unthinkable' in attempting to devise solutions to current social problems. Slavery certainly counts as unthinkable at the moment, but it has been ruled out of contention by moral theorists and philosophers on the rather simplistic ground that it is, in principle, a bad thing. So is killing. However, just as most of us believe that we can have just wars, so too we could have justified enslavement, if there is no better alternative on offer.

The scale of welfare dependency and the unaffordability of state welfare are major difficulties currently facing our liberal capitalist societies. The welfare state is not working; it cannot provide sufficient welfare and, furthermore, as most mainstream analysts now believe, it has morally pernicious effects on the poor. Leaving people hanging around in idleness at taxpayers' expense is now seen as a sort of cruelty masquerading as beneficence. The institution of voluntary slavery would be a huge help in stemming the tide of taxpayer-funded welfare payments, and would provide work for those now mired in self-destructive idleness. Slavery would work; and so would the slaves.